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Barbie trial may reveal some secrets

By Stanley Karnow

WASHINGTON — The prosecution of Klaus Barbie, the Gestapo chief recently nabbed by the French, will not breathe life back into the thousands he killed during World War II. But it threatens to rattle skeletons in the closet, both in France and in America.

There seems to be evidence that U.S. intelligence agents helped Barbie escape to South America at the end of the war in exchange for information about the Soviets.

If Barbie reveals that story at his trial — and he is likely to talk volubly in order to defend himself — he will add to the already growing number of accounts of assistance extended to Nazis and their collaborators by covert American operatives.

Serious charges have been leveled against senior Central Intelligence Agency officials for allegedly bringing pro-Nazi war criminals to the United States to gain their cooperation in planning clandestine anti-Communist schemes.

The recruitment of these monsters, several of whom are reported to be residing respectably in this country, was done in blatant violation of policies laid down by the Truman administration during the postwar period.

So there are top U.S. officials who share the mentality of Communists and Nazis to the degree that they believe that the end justifies the means. That outlook, in my estimation, is the slippery road to moral ruin.

But the Barbie case is bound to cause even more of an uproar in France. Indeed, one French historian, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, submits that the trial will be "an enor-

mous national psychodrama."

Movie addicts and television viewers no doubt suffer from the illusion that the overwhelming majority of the French were heroic figures in the underground resistance against the Germans, who occupied France during World War II. But just the opposite was true.

When I lived in France following the war, nearly every French man and woman I met claimed to have been in the resistance. Some even recounted romantic tales of their intrepid exploits.

I soon learned to my disappointment, however, that most of the French had tolerated the Nazis — and a good many actively assisted them in such heinous ways as informing on Jews destined for concentration camps.

Statistical estimates compiled since then reckon that only some 75,000 French — out of a total population of 40 million — opposed the Germans by 1943. And only about half of them were actually involved in any combat.

There probably was more fighting among rival French resistance factions than against the Germans. Communist groups were especially ruthless, taking advantage of the turmoil to wipe out their French political adversaries.

For the sake of preserving their national pride, though, the French as a matter of policy perpetuated the myth that the resistance to the Nazis had been a mass movement. Only lately has the myth begun to be cracked.

Within the past few years, for instance, the government-run television networks in France have permitted the showing of *The Sorrow and the Pity*, a brilliant documentary that dramatizes the widespread acceptance of Nazi rule by the French during the war.

In 1971, when the film still was banned, the director of one of the French television networks explained the prohibition by saying that "myths are important in the life of a people, and certain myths must not be destroyed."

Oddly enough, much of the credit for puncturing the phony legends belongs to an American scholar, Robert Paxton, who has meticulously researched the activities of the Vichy government, the regime that governed southern France during the war as a pawn of the Germans.

Vichyites have contended that they accommodated the Germans in order to spare the region. But Paxton has disclosed, among other things, that the satellite regime was repressive and racist — and even committed atrocities to curry favor with the Nazis.

Tried in his absence by two French courts, Barbie has been sentenced to death for more than 4,000 killings as well as the deportation of some 7,500 Jews during his reign as Gestapo boss in the city of Lyons.

He fled to Bolivia, where successive military juntas left him unmolested. But a new civilian president elected there in October expelled him on a technicality, and he was picked up by the French, who flew him to France early this month to stand trial again.

Barbie is worrying many French, signaling that he will name collaborators, and thus reopen old wounds. Not long ago, a former budget minister was indicted for wartime crimes — an indication that friends of the Nazis attained high rank, having concealed their records.

On his flight from Bolivia to France the other day, Barbie told reporters that his case ought to be shelved because "so many new crimes have happened" since World War II. He is correct — at least in impugning humanity. Millions of people have died in places as disparate as Siberia and Cambodia.

But, I think, the conscience of the world must be reminded repeatedly of man's inhumanity to man. Human conduct has not improved appreciably since the Dark Ages, but the human capacity for indignation is progress of sorts.